2002 Parliamentary Elections in Ukraine

Events, Results, Consequences (extract)

On 31 March 2002, parliamentary elections were held in Ukraine. As expected, they were a major success for the centrist-rightist coalition focused around former Prime Minister Viktor Yuschenko. The communists emerged significantly weaker from the vote, and the "party of power" achieved a poor result. Yet, due to the mixed electoral law (half of the deputies were elected in single-mandate districts), the latter block, firmly supported by President Leonid Kuchma, resulted as the main force in Parliament.

The results of particular parties and blocks were as follows: Viktor Yuschenko's Block received 23.57% of votes and 112 seats, the Communist Party of Ukraine – 19.98% of votes and 66 seats, the "For One Ukraine" block – 11.77% of votes and 101 seats, Yulia Tymoshenko's Block – 7.26% of votes and 22 seats, the Socialist Party of Ukraine – 6.87% of votes and 22 seats, and the Social Democratic Party of Ukraine (united) – 6.27% of votes and 24 seats. This shows how the mixed electoral regulations favour "For One Ukraine" and act against Yuschenko's block. One should note, however, that the latter gained the support of less than one quarter of voters.

Had the elections been held on the basis of proportional electoral regulations then, assuming the results were the same, "Our Ukraine" would have ended up with 139 seats, the Communist Party – 119 seats, "For One Ukraine" – 71 seats, Tymoshenko's block – 43 seats, the Socialist Party – 41 seats, and the Social Democratic Party – 37 seats. Although the electoral tactics of the main political forces would have been different if the electoral law had been proportional, inevitably influencing the results of the vote, the simulation cited above gives us an idea of how the Parliament of Ukraine would look, had it been elected under proportional regulations.

The elections were a great success for Viktor Yuschenko, who became the main candidate for the 2004 presidential elections. At the moment, Yuschenko has no serious rival, but two years remain until these elections take place. The success of the "For One Ukraine" coalition was earned mainly in single-mandate districts, owing to support granted by voters to local politicians and business people, and as a result of numerous, frequently serious abuses. It was also mainly in the single-mandate districts that the Communist Party faced their defeat: under proportional regulations, their results were slightly lower than four years ago. Finally, it is important that the elections were a success for the two formations of the firmly anti-presidential opposition: the Socialist Party of Ukraine and Yulia Tymoshenko's Block. Both became targets of fierce discrediting campaigns which, it seems, made them even more popular. Together with the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine, which did not make it into Parliament, Ukraine's radical opposition received a total of ca. 17% of votes.

The elections caused a marked consolidation of the Ukrainian political scene: fewer groups made it into Parliament, and the distance between those that did and those that failed was much greater than it had been four years ago. Still, the largest two groups are disjointed inter-party coalitions; hence the degree of consolidation being smaller than the election results could suggest. The elections confirmed that, on the one hand, there still exists a deep political split in Ukraine and, on the other, that this split is shifting: it used to be an East vs. West division, but it is now changing into a North vs. South division. This split also reflects the division of Ukraine into zones dominated by the centrist-rightist groups and the socialists (west, centre, and north-east) and the communists (south). Parties of the pro-presidential centre are not dominant in any of Ukraine's regions, but they hold strong positions in every region except for the west.

The elections took place a year ago and have, since that time, been overshadowed by subsequent events such as the new political crisis connected with the shaping of the distribution of power in Parliament and new attacks against president Kuchma, as well as the tarring of Ukraine's international image following its alleged breach of the embargo on arms supplies to Iraq. Even so, the importance of the elections has not diminished, not only because the parliament that emerged from the vote will influence developments in Ukraine over the next four years (including in the course of the presidential campaign) but also, and, perhaps, most importantly,

because the parliamentary elections have revealed the state of Ukrainian social awareness and political preferences in a manner that is not accessible to any polls.

The picture that emerges from an in-depth analysis of election results presents the Ukrainians as a much more politically mature society than commonly believed. Most voters support change within the frames of constitutional order. It turns out that the massive positive and negative (discrediting) propaganda messages in the media generated surprisingly little effect. Ukraine chose democracy: evolutionary change within the already established system, in which the ruling group and the opposition compete. Ukrainians also voted for change and against stagnation (there is a separate problem in that they are deeply divided as to the desired direction of such change). We must not forget that Ukrainian democracy is still very young, and that this was only the third time the country witnessed parliamentary elections held under democratic electoral regulations.

For the first time in the history of Ukraine's parliament, the new Verkhovna Rada represents a clear-cut political situation: there is the pro-presidential centre made up of numerous fractions that will co-operate on key issues, and the anti-presidential opposition that includes the left wing and the right wing blocks. The centre consists in fractions originating from "For One Ukraine" and the social democrats. Right wing opposition is formed by Yulia Tymoshenko's Block and "Our Ukraine", and left wing opposition includes the Socialist and Communist parties. While "Our Ukraine" and the Communist Party comprise "constructive" opposition capable of co-operating with the president's team on certain issues, the Socialist Party and Yulia Tymoshenko's Block are radical uncompromising opponents. Viktor Yuschenko is particularly unwilling to engage in any political co-operation with Yulia Tymoshenko.

This kind of parliament will not be able to form a coalition capable of carrying out the constitutional reform proposed by Leonid Kuchma (the goal of which is to further strengthen the president's office), nor one capable of impeaching the president or being able to carry out a reform of the entire governmental system and introduce a parliamentary cabinet system. President Kuchma may feel secure, but the election results will inevitably force him to revise his political strategy and carefully consider the candidate that he will support in the presidential elections that will take place in autumn 2004.

Ukraine's Parliamentary System after the Elections

The dominant force in Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada, elected in March 2002, are the deputies of "One Ukraine", a fraction of the pro-presidential centre. "One Ukraine" has refused to admit any of the opposition's representatives (either from the right or left wings) into the parliament's presidium, but has accepted opposition-appointed heads of many parliamentary commissions. Viktor Yuschenko's "Our Ukraine", which has been the largest parliamentary fraction since June, attempted to proclaim itself the centre of the parliamentary majority, but its policy was awkward and inconsistent, and the main success of this club was that it didn't break up. Viktor Yuschenko's moves have been particularly incoherent and they undermined the image of Yuschenko as Ukraine's future leader, created throughout the course of the electoral campaign.

In autumn, the main oligarchic groups and their representative fractions ("One Ukraine", which proved to be a useless instrument, was dissolved in June), reached a compromise with the president. It was agreed that the new prime minister should be a Donetsk clan representative (Viktor Yanukovych), and that the Dnipropetrovsk clan should appoint the president of the National Bank of Ukraine (this position went to Serhij Tihipko). The Kyiv clan obtained the President's Administration (Viktor Medvedchuk was appointed in spring) and a considerable number of parliamentary commissions. The president's interests in the government are to be protected by Mykola Azarov, former Head of the State Tax Administration. This compromise "package" was designed to secure the shares of the main oligarchic clans in the power and the president's strong position as mediator.

Implementation of these agreements was unexpectedly rendered difficult by "Our Ukraine", which decided to defend Volodymyr Stelmakh, the president of the central bank, and its participation in commissions. When the parliament passed the respective resolutions "Our Ukraine", together with other opposition clubs, caused a parliamentary obstruction and, towards the end of 2002, forced the cancellation of the resolution on the appointment of commission leaders. Still, this was a defeat: Yuschenko, who spent all autumn trying to persuade the parliamentary representations of the Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk clans to form an alliance with him rather than with Medvedchuk, was ultimately pushed towards the opposition, which he had tried to avoid. On the other hand, the restoration of the original division of parliamentary commissions was Medvedchuk's first serious failure since becoming Head of the President's Administration.

Parliament's new majority is unstable. It won't support the government and the president on all matters. Yet the crisis described below was a growth crisis, and Ukraine's parliamentary system emerged from it all the stronger. The main oligarchic clans, which now aim to legalise their interests, are ever more willing to settle their business in Parliament rather than through lobbying with the President's Administration. Since the term of office the new Verkhovna Rada expires in 2006, the new president will have to deal with an already firmly established parliament.

The President's Administration, a body that is not projected in the constitutional system of state bodies and has enormous influential power over other bodies, is a relic of the soviet system – it has stepped into the role of functional successor of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. A substantial group of oligarchs are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the Administration's omnipotence, and especially with the power of its present head, Viktor Medvedchuk. This may lead to a diminishment of the Administration's influence, but its future fate will lie in the hands of the new president.

The Ukrainian democracy is still predominantly a system of institutions and procedures that lack the base of democratic attitudes and habits: these are not easily found either among the political elite (this also refers to pro-Western groups), or the voters. While it is possible to establish institutions by decree, attitudes and habits need to develop and take root on the basis of the functioning of formal mechanisms (institutions) of parliamentary democracy. This takes time: the process may require decades, if not entire generations. But even today and even among the political elite, the support for democratic mechanisms in Ukraine is strong enough to prevent a potential turn towards authoritarian rule.